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SIPDIS

EUR/WE FOR ALEX MCKNIGHT AND STACIE ZERDECKI

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SUBJECT: SPAIN: BASQUE REGION REFLECTS ON POLITICAL CHANGE  
IN 2009

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[B](#). MADRID 139  
[C](#). MADRID 707

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Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission William H. Duncan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: A broad range of Basque politicians and civic leaders privately reflected privately on political changes in the Basque Region in 2009 and assessed the first four months of the Socialist (PSE) government led by Lehendakari - regional premier or U.S Governor equivalent - Patxi Lopez (See Refs A and B) in separate mid-September meetings with POLOFF. While nearly all of those consulted agreed that there has been significant change in the region, there were mixed reviews on how successful the PSE government has been in its initial months in office. For its part, the PSE drove home the message that it is trying to make the Basque Region "normal" and "boring" to counter its long-held reputation for violence and conflict. Both the PSE and its de facto junior partner, the conservative Popular Party (PP), suggested their alliance was likely to last for the duration of the four-year legislature. END SUMMARY.

//PSE: Important Changes Will Take Time to Consolidate//

[1](#)3. (C) Andoni Unzueta, Secretary General for Communications and a key Lopez political adviser, Guillermo Echenique, Secretary General for Foreign Relations, and Irune Aguirrezabal, Director of Foreign Relations, on September 9 told POLOFF that they were "satisfied" with the PSE's progress to date and suggested that little by little, the PSE was implementing important changes, but these symbolic efforts were not necessarily quantifiable. These officials from the Office of the Lehendakari asserted that they are "winning the first steps of this battle" and that the public knows that Lopez will defend the interests of all Basques. They further claimed that the Basque public is "learning to live in more than a monocolored world" after 70 years of "totalitarian rule," first by General Franco and later by the PNV. Unzueta stated that he did not have the least doubt that the PSE can count on the support of the PP throughout Lopez's full four-year term, arguing that it would be political "suicide" to break their accord (Ref A). Separately, Idoia Mendia, spokesperson for the Office of the Lehendakari, told POLOFF "it's true" that the PP and PSE have "nothing in common" in terms of their social and economic policies, but their pact serves the Basque Region and is open for other parties to join. She said the most important thing that has happened so far under PSE rule is that the public has seen that the region did not "implode" under non-nationalist rule.

She asserted that the PSE is trying to emphasize dialogue in its interaction with other parties and the public.

//PP Sees "New Era" in Basque Region//

14. (C) Anton Damborenea, President of the PP in the Basque province of Vizcaya, and Leopoldo Barreda, spokesperson for the PP caucus in the regional parliament, were positively giddy in reflecting on the "night and day difference" in the political fortunes of the PP Basque wing over the past year. They assessed that the March elections and the subsequent PSE-PP pact to form a government have created the "end of an era" in Basque politics and that the region has entered "uncharted territory" in which "everything is unwritten." They said that although some leading conservative opinion leaders grumbled about PP regional leader Antonio Basagoiti's pact with the PSE, the PP national party headquarters itself never objected to the deal. The two PP officials suggested that the PSE-PP accord would likely hold for the full legislature but will become strained as the next scheduled regional election draws closer. The duo also delighted in saying that the Basque public is "learning that the PNV is just another party."

//PNV Still Adjusting to Life as An Opposition Party//

15. (C) Offering a different perspective, Inaki Goikeotxeta, the senior official on foreign policy issues within the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) admitted that 2009 has been "a pretty tough year" and suggested that what has occurred in the Basque Region has not been an era of change but a change of era. However, he was adamant that the PNV did not "lose" the March 2009 election, as is sometimes reported in the media. He pointed out that - despite being dislodged from office for the first time since 1980 - the PNV won the most

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seats in the regional parliament and the largest percent of the popular vote (Ref A). Goikeotxeta said it was "amazing" that the PSE and PP aligned in a "marriage of convenience" and asserted that the only thing they accomplished was to remove the PNV from power. He pointed to a July 2009 poll by Euskobarometro - the region's most respected polling firm - that found that 65 percent of respondents had little or no faith in the Lopez government. He further alleged that the PSE and PP do not have any policy initiatives beyond the accord they signed. Goikeotxeta criticized the PSE's efforts to take down public posters and photos that glorify ETA members (Ref C), calling this move too provocative for ETA and some Basque nationalists. He suggested that the PSE's "cure was worse than the illness" and said that the situation needs a "prudent, proportional response." He concluded his evaluation by describing the PSE government as "weak" and "looking for our (the PNV's) help."

//Thoughts from Observers of Basque Politics//

16. (C) Eduardo Uriarte, Manager of Foundation for Liberty, says there has been "enormous change" in the Basque Region in the past year, although it has not happened as the Socialists envisioned, since it has involved a PSE-PP partnership. He assessed that "bit by bit" there are "appreciable changes" in the Basque Region under the Lopez Administration and judged that the PSE has done well in defending civil rights, in counter-terrorism initiatives and in supporting victims of terrorism. Uriarte added that he notes a certain relaxation in the political atmosphere in the Basque Region these days and - echoing Mendia - suggested that the public is realizing that life under PSE rule is not as bad as the Basque nationalist doomsayers said it would be. He said that for the first time people are beginning to mix socially with other people who do not hold the same political views. Uriarte is a former ETA member who was sentenced to death at the famous Burgos trial of 1970, received amnesty during Spain's transition to democracy and later was active in Basque municipal politics as a Socialist. His NGO lobbies

for peace in the Basque Region, as well as an end to ETA.

¶7. (C) According to Maite Pagazaurtundua, President of the Association for Victims of Terrorism, under PSE rule, there has been a "qualitative jump" in support for victims of terrorism. She said that under former PNV Lehendakari (1999-2009) Juan Jose Ibbaretxe, the regional government provided a bare minimum of support to terrorism victims "to cover appearances," but was never truly committed to victims' rights as a political priority. In contrast, Pagazaurtundua deemed important the Lopez Administration's political will to make real changes in this area. She also applauded the Lopez Administration's initial steps to end a sympathetic editorial slant to ETA in programming on the Basque public television and radio network.

¶8. (C) Oscar Beltran, editor of Bilbao-based El Correo newspaper, offered a "wait and see" approach to the PSE's initiatives, suggesting that the Lopez Administration was still in the formative stages and had not accomplished too much just yet. He pointed out that - broadly speaking - officials holding the two most senior levels of power have never been in government before and that officials in the third and fourth tiers were either appointed by the PNV during 1980-2009 or have always fulfilled their duties in an PNV-led environment. Beltran suggested that the PSE fears their initiatives may be sabotaged from the inside.

¶9. (C) From his vantage point in Madrid, Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca, an ETA and electoral politics expert at the Juan March Institute, agreed with the notion that most of the PSE government's accomplishments to date have been symbolic. He also assessed that - because of weak public support - both the PSE and PP were under pressure to hide any partisan differences and make their pact work. Sanchez-Cuenca acknowledged the PSE's efforts to remove public murals, slogans and posters glorifying ETA, but noted that the implementation of that initiative will fall to city halls throughout the region, where the political will to do so - especially in rural areas - is not very strong. He also praised the ascendant career of Basagoiti, whom he said has accomplished quite a bit in a little more than a year as President of the PP's Basque wing.

CHACON